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ELITE FENCING COACHING

PRIVATE COACHING RESOURCE SERIES

The Mental Game

For Fencers



Pre-tournament routines, between-touch resets, post-bout recovery, and the mindset habits that separate good fencers from great ones.

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A Note from Coach Derek

I've coached fencers who had every physical tool – fast feet, sharp blade work, excellent conditioning – and still lost bouts they should have won. Not because they weren't good enough. Because they couldn't stay present.

The mental game is not some mysterious extra layer reserved for elite athletes. It's a skill. Like footwork. Like parrying. And like every other skill in fencing, it gets better with practice.

This guide gives you practical mental tools you can use before, during, and after every competition. Not theory. Not motivational quotes. Real techniques that I've seen work over 20 years of coaching and competing at the highest levels of the sport.

The fencers who win the close bouts – the 14-14 DEs, the 4-4 pool bouts – are not always the most talented. They're the ones who stay calm, stay focused, and trust what they've trained. This guide teaches you how to become that fencer.

– Coach Derek

Why the Mental Game Matters

Fencing is one of the most mentally demanding sports in the world. A bout can last three minutes or thirty, but the outcome is often determined by a handful of moments where focus, composure, and decision-making matter more than physical ability.

Consider this: in a 15-touch DE bout, the difference between winning and losing is often one or two touches. One lapse in focus. One emotional reaction that gives away the next point. One moment where you stop fencing and start hoping.

The mental game is not about being fearless or emotionless. It's about building habits that help you stay in control when the pressure comes. Every fencer feels nervous before a big bout. Every fencer gets frustrated after a bad call. The difference is what happens next.

COACH'S TIP: The goal is not to eliminate nerves or frustration. The goal is to have a system for what you do when they show up. That system is what this guide teaches you.

The Night Before: Mental Preparation

Tournament day starts the night before. What you do in the final hours before sleep sets the foundation for how you'll perform tomorrow.

Set Your Goals

Every tournament should have three types of goals. Write them down – not just in your head, on paper or in your phone.

Outcome Goal: What result do you want? Examples: make the top 8, win 3 pool bouts, beat a specific seed. Pick one. Be specific.

Tactical Goals: What do you want to do technically? Examples: attack with a clear extension before lunging, use distance before committing to attacks, keep my point online during advances. Pick two.

Process Goal: What mental habit do you want to maintain? Examples: reset between every single touch, breathe before en garde, stay calm after bad calls. Pick one.

Your process goal is the most important one. It's the only goal you have complete control over, and it's the one that makes the other two possible.

Visualization

Spend 5–10 minutes visualizing yourself fencing well. This is not daydreaming. This is deliberate mental rehearsal.

- Close your eyes. Breathe slowly. Picture the venue, the strip, the scoring machine.
- See yourself in en garde. Feel the grip in your hand. Feel your feet on the strip.
- Visualize yourself scoring a clean touch. See the light go on. Feel the satisfaction.
- Visualize yourself getting scored on – then immediately resetting. Calm face. Deep breath. Back to en garde.
- Visualize yourself down 2–0 in a pool bout – then coming back to win 5–3. See the composure.
- Visualize yourself in a tight DE – 13–13 – and staying present for the next touch instead of thinking about the score.
- Visualize yourself after the tournament – proud of how you competed regardless of the result.

COACH'S TIP: Visualization works best when you include both success AND adversity. If you only visualize perfect bouts, you won't be prepared when things get hard. Visualize the hard moments and see yourself handling them well.

Choose Your Focus Word

Pick one word that captures the mindset you want to carry into competition. This word becomes your anchor – something you return to when your mind starts to drift.

Examples: Patient. Present. Sharp. Calm. Aggressive. Relentless. Controlled. Decisive.

Say it out loud before bed. Say it in the morning. Say it before your first bout. When you feel your focus slipping during a bout, return to this word.

Sleep

- Put your phone down 30 minutes before bed. No screens.
- Don't stay up reviewing old bout footage or worrying about opponents.
- Get at least 8 hours. Sleep is the single best performance enhancer available to you.
- Trust that you've done the work. Tomorrow is about executing, not cramming.

Morning Of: Setting the Tone

The morning of a tournament is not the time to make changes. It's the time to activate the preparation you've already done.

- Review your three goals one time. Outcome, tactical, process.
- Say your focus word out loud.
- Eat a familiar breakfast. Nothing experimental.
- Drink 16–20 oz of water before leaving.
- In the car: listen to music that puts you in the right headspace. Some fencers need energy. Some need calm. Know which one you are.
- Do NOT scroll social media. Do NOT start strategizing about specific opponents. You don't know your pool yet.
- Arrive early. Check in immediately. Then warm up with purpose.

MINDSET: The car ride is not the time to panic about what might happen. It's the time to get your mind quiet, focused, and ready. You've prepared. Now trust it.

Before Your First Bout: The Warm-Up

Your physical warm-up is also a mental warm-up. Use it to transition from “person at a tournament” to “fencer ready to compete.”

- Light jog or skipping for 3–5 minutes. Get your heart rate up.
- Dynamic stretches: leg swings, hip circles, arm circles, torso rotations.
- Fencing-specific footwork: advances, retreats, lunges, recoveries. Start slow, build speed.
- 5–10 full-speed lunges. Make them sharp. This tells your body it's time.
- If you have a partner, 2–3 minutes of blade work and distance drills.
- End with 2–3 deep breaths and your focus word.
- Put on full gear and be ready to fence 5 minutes before pools start.

Your first pool bout should NOT be your warm-up. If you're cold in the first bout, you've already given away 2–3 touches.

During Bouts: The Between-Touch Reset

This is the most important mental skill in fencing. What you do in the 5–15 seconds between touches determines your performance more than any single action on the strip.

Most fencers let the previous touch control the next one. If they scored, they get overconfident and sloppy. If they got scored on, they get frustrated and rush. Either way, they're fencing the last touch instead of the next one.

The reset is how you break that cycle.

The 4-Step Reset Routine

After every single touch — whether you scored or got scored on — do the same thing:

Step 1: Breathe. One slow, deliberate exhale. Not a sigh. Not a gasp. A controlled breath that tells your nervous system to settle.

Step 2: Feet. Feel your feet on the strip. Shift your weight slightly. This anchors you in the present moment and prevents your mind from replaying the last touch.

Step 3: Focus word. Say your word silently. Patient. Present. Sharp. Whatever you chose. This resets your intention.

Step 4: Eyes up. Look at your opponent. Not at the scoreboard. Not at your coach. Not at your parents. Look at the person in front of you. The next touch starts now.

This entire routine takes about 5 seconds. Do it after every touch. Scored a beautiful attack? Reset. Got hit with a counterattack? Reset. Bad call from the referee? Reset. The routine is the same regardless of what just happened.

COACH'S TIP: Practice this reset routine in training. Do it between every touch during practice bouts. If you only try it for the first time at a tournament, it won't feel natural. Build the habit in the gym so it's automatic when it matters.

Managing Specific Situations

When you're behind: Simplify. Go back to one action you trust. Don't try to score three touches at once. A 0–3 deficit in a pool bout is recoverable. A 5–10 deficit in a DE is recoverable. You recover by fencing one touch at a time, not by panicking.

When you're ahead: Don't change what's working. Don't start protecting a lead. Keep fencing offensively and decisively. A 3–0 lead means nothing if you stop fencing. The most dangerous score in fencing is 4–1 because the leading fencer often relaxes.

After a bad call: This is the hardest moment. You feel wronged. You want to argue. You want the referee to know they're wrong. Here's the truth: the referee has already moved on. If you haven't, you're the only one still losing. Reset. Fence the next touch. Control what you can control.

When the opponent is celebrating: Let them. Their celebration is not your problem. Return to en garde. Focus on your feet. Say your word. The fencer who resets faster wins the mental battle.

When you're fencing someone ranked higher: Their ranking is not on the strip. Their name is not on the strip. There is one person in front of you. Fence them. Not their reputation.

Between Bouts: Recovery and Preparation

The time between pool bouts or between pools and DEs is when many fencers lose their edge. They check their phone, socialize, overeat, or obsess about results. Use this time strategically.

Between Pool Bouts

- ❑ Sit down if possible. Keep your legs warm but don't stand the entire time.
- ❑ Drink water. Eat a small snack if needed.
- ❑ Review one tactical note – one thing you want to do better in the next bout.
- ❑ Watch your upcoming opponents fence if possible. Note their tendencies.
- ❑ Do NOT check your phone obsessively. Stay present.
- ❑ Keep your mask and weapon within arm's reach.

Between Pools and DEs

This is the most important transition of the tournament. The fencing changes dramatically from pools to DEs, and your mindset needs to shift with it.

- ❑ Check the tableau immediately. Know your opponent and your strip assignment.
- ❑ If you have time, watch your DE opponent fence. Note one or two tendencies.
- ❑ Re-warm up physically – light footwork, a few lunges, dynamic stretches. Don't go into a 15-touch bout cold.
- ❑ Reset your goals. Your pool results are done. They don't matter now. The DE is a new tournament.
- ❑ Revisit your focus word. Take three deep breaths.
- ❑ Eat something light if needed. Hydrate.

COACH'S TIP: Many fencers fence their best pools of the day, then lose in the first DE because they sat around for 45 minutes, got cold, checked their phone, and lost their edge. Treat the transition like a second warm-up.

DE Strategy: The Three-Period Approach

A 15-touch DE bout with three 3-minute periods is a different sport than a 5-touch pool bout. It requires pacing, adaptation, and mental endurance.

Period 1: Information

The first period is about gathering data, not about winning the bout. You have 9 minutes. Use the first 3 wisely.

- ❑ What distance does the opponent prefer?
- ❑ Do they attack or wait? Are they aggressive or patient?
- ❑ What do they do when you pressure them? Retreat? Counterattack? Stand their ground?

- What is their go-to action? What do they repeat?
- Don't panic if you're down 2-4 after Period 1. You have information now. Use it.

Period 2: Execution

You've gathered your information. Now execute your plan.

- Attack what they showed you in Period 1. If they retreat under pressure, keep pressuring.
- If your original plan isn't working, adjust. Don't keep doing the same thing and hoping for different results.
- Start building your lead here. This is where the bout is won or lost for most fencers.
- Stay disciplined. Don't get sloppy with a lead or desperate when behind.

Period 3: Composure

The final period is purely mental. Both fencers are tired. Both are emotionally invested. The fencer who stays calmer wins.

- If you're ahead: keep fencing. Don't protect the lead. Stay aggressive and decisive.
- If you're behind: simplify. Pick one or two actions and commit to them fully.
- If it's close: this is where your reset routine matters most. Every touch is its own bout now.
- If it goes to priority: accept the coin flip calmly. If you have priority, stay patient. If you don't, be decisive. Either way, fence the minute with purpose.

COACH'S TIP: The most common mistake in Period 3 is rushing. Fencers who are behind try to score quickly and make careless mistakes. Fencers who are ahead try to run out the clock and become passive. Both are wrong. Fence the same way you fenced when you were scoring. Trust your game.

Post-Bout: The Self-Assessment

What you do in the 10 minutes after a bout determines whether you learn from it or just experience it. This applies to wins AND losses.

After Every Bout (Win or Loss)

- Take 60 seconds to breathe and drink water before analyzing anything.
- Ask yourself: Did I follow my process goal? Did I reset between touches?
- Ask yourself: What worked? What is one thing I did well?
- Ask yourself: What is one thing I want to adjust for the next bout?
- Do NOT replay the entire bout touch by touch. Pick one positive and one adjustment. That's enough.

After a Win

Celebrate briefly. Then move on. The next bout doesn't care about the last one.

- Acknowledge what you did well. Give yourself credit.
- Identify one thing you can sharpen for the next round.
- Stay warm. Stay hydrated. Stay focused.
- Do not assume the next bout will be easy because this one went well.

After a Loss

This is the hardest moment in fencing. Give yourself permission to feel disappointed — for about 60 seconds. Then start learning.

- Take a breath. Drink water. Sit down if you need to.
- Do NOT immediately replay every mistake. Your memory right after a loss is biased toward negative moments.
- Ask: What is one thing I can take away from this bout?
- Ask: Did I compete the way I wanted to, regardless of the score?
- If you have more bouts, reset completely. The loss is over. The next bout is new.
- If the tournament is over, label your footage, pack up, and save the detailed analysis for later with your coach.

COACH'S TIP: The best post-bout conversation you can have with yourself is: "What did I learn, and what do I want to work on in practice this week?" That question turns every loss into an investment.

Post-Tournament: Long-Term Mental Growth

The mental game is not something you turn on at tournaments and turn off at practice. It's built in training, one session at a time.

Tournament Reflection (Within 24 Hours)

- Write down your three goals from before the tournament. Did you achieve them?
- Write down one thing you did well mentally (not technically — mentally).
- Write down one mental habit you want to improve.
- Review your footage with your coach. Watch for body language, reset habits, and composure — not just blade work.
- Rate your mental performance 1-10, separate from your result. You can fence well mentally and still lose. You can win and still be mentally sloppy.

Building Mental Habits in Practice

The following habits should be part of your regular training, not just tournament prep:

- Use your reset routine between every touch in practice bouts. Make it automatic.
- Practice fencing from behind. Start practice bouts at 0–2 or 0–3 and work on staying calm.
- Practice fencing with a lead. Start at 3–0 and work on staying aggressive.
- Set a process goal for every practice, not just tournaments.
- Visualize for 5 minutes before bed, 2–3 times per week. Not just before tournaments.
- After practice, ask yourself: “Was I present today? Did I fence with intention, or was I just going through the motions?”



Final Coach’s Note

The mental game is not a switch you flip. It’s a muscle you build. Every time you reset between touches in practice, you’re building it. Every time you stay calm after a bad call, you’re building it. Every time you choose to learn from a loss instead of dwelling on it, you’re building it.

The fencers I’ve coached who have gone the furthest are not the ones with the most natural talent. They’re the ones who learned to stay present, stay calm, and fence one touch at a time. That’s a skill. And like every skill in fencing, it gets better with practice.

Now go compete. I’ll see you on the other side.

— Coach Derek